

Beach birds flee marauding foxes

Resettle on Cape, at least for now

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DUXBURY — The seabird population on area beaches took a dive this summer after foxes caused 10,000 common terns to flee Plymouth Long Beach and destroyed piping plover nests in Plymouth and Duxbury.

The 5,000 pairs of common terns from Plymouth Long Beach fled to three other Massachusetts beaches last month after foxes dug under the fence protecting them and

scared them away.

The last group of common terns left Plymouth June 5 and were located several weeks later after they settled on Cape Cod. At least 3,000 pairs went to Chatham, about 1,000 went to Orleans and nearly 700 pairs flew to Yarmouthport, according to Scott Hecker, director of the coastal waterbird program at the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Hecker said the birds were located when the populations on the other beaches dramatically increased.

"We pretty much think they've settled in those three locations," Hecker said. "They could all come back next year, (but) it's really unpredictable."

Since the terns fled, the foxes also have

abandoned the beach because they did not have enough food.

Foxes also preyed on endangered piping plovers in Plymouth and Duxbury. The foxes ate eggs and intimidated many plovers into abandoning their nests. Hecker said most of the birds have attempted to nest twice.

Plovers lay up to four eggs each season, but only three chicks have fledged from the nearly one dozen plover pairs on Plymouth Long Beach. Hecker said there is still one nest left on the beach. Duxbury Beach has about 14 plover pairs and nearly 12 young that have fledged.

"We will try to outfox the fox. But that's not easy," Hecker said.

He said the possibilities for further protecting the birds include surrounding the eggs and

young chicks with better fencing in some areas and not using any fences in other places.

Hecker said foxes eventually target the fencing because they learn that eggs are nearby.

The four eggs laid by the first plover pair to nest on the South Shore were destroyed in April. The birds had nested in the middle of an experimental site developed by the Duxbury Beach Reservation, which owns Duxbury Beach and leases it to the town.

The organization wanted to encourage the plovers to nest in a certain area by covering the beach grass with sand and creating the unvegetated habitat favored by the birds.

But a fox destroyed the eggs after jumping the 4-foot-high wire fence surrounding the nest and tearing through the netting on top.